A Short History of Blasphemy

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‘Red for the judges and black for the priests’
- Jean Genet on Stendhal, to Mohamed Choukri, in Jean Genet in Tangier (1974)

In Book II of the Republic, Socrates discusses with Adimantus and Glaucon the origins of justice and injustice in states, and at a certain point it becomes clear that blasphemy is key to these origins. Socrates is presenting his brief against the ‘false stories’ of the poets Homer and Hesiod, contending that these stories corrupt the youth. The blame comes, he says, ‘When anyone images badly in his speech the true nature of gods and heroes, like a painter whose portraits bear no resemblance to his models’ (377, e, my emphasis). This lack of verisimilitude is not only aesthetically displeasing; it is injurious to the state. This is in the middle of Plato’s most full-throated censure of the poets and their blasphemies, in which he claims, ‘while they speak evil of the gods they at the same time make cowards of the children’ (381, e). Homer and Hesiod are singled out because ‘there is no lying poet in God’ (382, d). As it turned out, of course, there is no lying philosopher in God, either, and Socrates was eventually tried for blasphemy (against the Athenian ideal of the polis, really), found guilty, and suffered the ultimate punishment.

But since blasphemy breaches the unspeakable, it is clearly in the realm of the poets. Poets are makers (poein); they make things up. When I was a young poet in San Francisco, Eric Havelock’s Preface to Plato was an important book among the poets who were my teachers in the Poetics Program at New College. Robert Duncan had gotten the book from Charles Olson, who called it ‘the only work in criticism which is relevant at all to developments in thought and poetry over the past 150 years’. Havelock’s thesis is that Plato’s condemnation of the poets in the Republic is based on the fact that the oral tradition of Homer and Hesiod had become a technological obstacle to the new ways of thinking being brought about through literacy. I teach Preface to Plato now, partly because Havelock’s well-formed argument about the transition from the technologies of orality to literacy is useful today as an analogy for our current transition from literacy to the image.

Whether ‘imaging badly’ in speech, or ‘speaking evil’ in images, blasphemy has long been with us. But as far as I know, the Greek word blasphemy (βλασφημέω) does not appear in Homer or Hesiod. Liddell and Scott have it first in Euripides’ Ion and then in Plato’s Laws (‘when some worshipper… breaks down into downright blasphemy’). Blasphemy seems to have come in with philosophy and law, especially when the Law, ‘that which is laid down’, became explicit enough to distinguish between ‘evil speaking’ (blasphemy) and its opposite, ‘virtuous speaking’ (euphemism), in a legal sense. Blame is a doublet of blasphemy, and the law is concerned with assigning and apportioning blame; or fame, which is also based on what is said about someone or something.

The Law, expressing the divine will of God, was laid down in the Pentateuch. It is often asserted that the Mosaic law against blasphemy is revealed in Leviticus 24:16, but the truth is that the law is already a given there, and this passage is a legal clarification of its reach. Shelomith’s son comes into the camp and curses the name of the Lord. The problem is that Shelomith is an ‘Israelitish’ woman (in the King James Version), meaning she is only half-Israelite. So the question is, does the law against blasphemy apply to this mixed-blood offspring? The people bring him to Moses because they’re not sure whether the law applies equally to a half- or quarter-Israelite. Jehovah speaks to Moses and says that everyone who heard the blasphemer should lay their hands on his head and stone him to death. The stranger is, in effect, judged to be worthy of punishment.
In the Gospels, Jesus loosens the penalties against blasphemy somewhat, but there are still fine points of law to attend to. In *Matthew* 12:22–31 and *Mark* 3:22–30, an exception to the New Testament leniency in response to blasphemy is identified: blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. This particular offense is distinctly unforgiveable, leading to eternal damnation. Why? Because he who would blaspheme against the Holy Ghost has ‘an unclean spirit’. He is also, presumably, an adversary of Jesus, a Pharisee, who attributed Christ’s miracles not to the Holy Ghost, but to the workings of Beelzebub. That is what is unforgiveable. Blame and fame are not appropriately apportioned.

Blame and fame, in the form of celebrity gossip and scandal, have become ubiquitous in our current image sphere, but the poet and film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini’s life (1922–1975), death, and work marked a turning point in the modern blasphemy/blame/fame nexus. When his younger brother Guido, a Partisan in the Italian Resistance fighting the Nazis and Fascists, was killed by Yugoslav Communists in a power struggle in 1945, Pasolini was devastated, but still spoke out in favor of Communism as the only way to provide a new culture. Soon after joining the Italian Communist Party, however, he was charged with the corruption of minors and obscene acts and expelled. He fled with his mother to Rome.

On 1 March 1963, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *La ricotta* – following a crew making a film about the Passion of Christ, with Orson Welles as the brilliant and loquacious Marxist director – was seized and Pasolini was charged with ‘insulting the religion of the state’. The statute invoked was a remnant of the Rocco Code, the Fascist penal code put in place by Arturo Rocco in 1931. Pasolini was found guilty and sentenced to four months in prison. This sentence was eventually overturned on appeal, but it took three years, during which Pasolini was continually under threat.

The Catholic Church was initially ready to convict him of blasphemy for daring to make a film of *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, but this turned out to be one of the most faithful depictions of the Gospels ever put on film. An homage to Pope John XXIII, it found enthusiastic approval when it was shown at the Second Vatican Council. Pasolini considered asking Jack Kerouac to play the role of Christ, but settled on a young Spaniard named Enrique Irazoqui. A twenty-two-year-old Giorgio Agamben also appeared in the film, as Philip the Apostle.
Our current communications environment is preoccupied with arguments about blame and fame. A controversy has erupted over Jann Wenner’s decision to put a dreamy photograph of the Boston Marathon bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev on the cover of the 1 August 2013 issue of Rolling Stone magazine: terrorist as rock star. The result of the controversy was that the issue sold twice as many copies as usual, and the all but extinguished reputation of Rolling Stone for social relevance was briefly revived.

The truth is that blasphemy is still very much with us. Six American states – Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Michigan, and Wyoming – have laws against blasphemy on the books, as do more than thirty countries. Ireland passed a law against blasphemy in 2009. Huge crowds demonstrated recently in Bangladesh demanding stricter laws against blasphemy. After dancing and shouting ‘Mother Mary please drive Putin away’ for thirty seconds on 21 February 2012 in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, three members of the punk-art collective Pussy Riot were convicted on charges of ‘disrupting social order by an act of hooliganism that showed disrespect for society and is motivated by a religious hatred or enmity’, and two of them, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, are currently serving two-year prison sentences. As the Reverend Chloe Breyer, a priest at Saint Mary’s Episcopal Church in West Harlem, New York, said in response to the Pussy Riot sentences, ‘More often than not, what has been deemed insulting or offensive to God in history has originated in the body or voice of a woman.’

In his final film, Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom, Pasolini took blasphemy and obscenity back to their source, in language – the language of Sade, yes, but also to the end of language, where power obliterates it. Salò is an unspeakable film.
Pasolini’s blasphemy had previously been directed at the Catholic church as a bourgeois institution, as ‘the merciless heart of the State’.

But in Salò, he came to the end of the line, to the end of language. Sam Rohdie saw it clearly, in his book The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini:

His struggle with the world and himself was essentially aesthetic and linguistic. He wrote not about this or that but purely... To write in such a way is to write parenthetically in order to delay the end of writing and hence keep the ideal alive in ambiguity, in the provisional, as an eternal potential.

The work of writing that Pasolini left unfinished at his death was titled The Divine Mimesis. It was to be the culmination and new testament of his art, and in it he prophesied his own death, that would prevent him from completing the work, in chilling detail. Pasolini’s friend Giuseppe Zigaina later wrote

It was as if a latter-day saint not recognized by the Catholic church sought martyrdom as a renunciation of mortal life that would at the same time be a passing over to life after death – perhaps to be understood as the artist’s presence in human memory.

What sets us apart from the gods is death. Gods cannot die, so their narratives have no arc and no end. The human story is finite and thus meaningful. ‘If we were immortal’, wrote Pasolini, ‘we would be immoral, because our example would never have an end; therefore, it would be undecipherable, eternally suspended and ambiguous’. In a ‘Note for Canto VII’ of The Divine Mimesis, he wrote,

In this Hell (as in life) cynics are lacking. Nor could I have been one either. I was afraid of it. It seemed dishonorable to me. Perhaps I defended myself from cynicism just because it was a sacred antidote against the ‘wringing of my heart’. I passed, then, like a wind behind the last walls or meadows of the city – or like a barbarian who came down to destroy, and ended by distracting himself by looking, and kissing, someone who resembled himself – before deciding to turn back.


2 Sam Rohdie, The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini, British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, London and Bloomington, Indiana, 1995, p 197
3 Bernhart Schwenk and Michael Semff, editors, P.P.P.: Pier Paolo Pasolini and Death, Pinakothek der Moderne and Hatje Cantz, Munich and Ostfildern-Ruit, 2005, p 28
5 Pier Paolo Pasolini, The Divine Mimesis, Thomas Erling Peterson, trans, Double Dance Press, Berkeley, California, 1980, p 64